

Moral panics as civilising and decivilising processes? A comparative discussion¹

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Abstract

This paper draws from a variety of case study examples of 'moral panic analyses', in combination with figurational analyses of the same topics, to comparatively explore the variant forms 'moral panics' take and how they develop, thereby analysing the multiple forms civilising processes can take. Using 'moral panic' as an illustrative example, this paper will discuss how and to what extent civilising processes can give rise to decivilising trends (in the form of moral panics) yet, at the same time, these moral panics can also bring about integrative 'civilising' effects in the form of civilising offensives that reflect possible long-term civilising trends (in the form of accelerated campaigns; a civilising 'spurt'). Throughout this comparative discussion, I aim to highlight not only the complexity of civilising processes, but also the complex civilising and decivilising aspects of moral panics, thereby overcoming the dichotomous normative conceptualization of moral panics as being *either* 'good' or 'bad' panics. The paper then moves onto a discussion of the paradoxical idea of viewing moral panics as civilising *and* decivilising processes. Drawing from Foucault, Elias, and moral panic, the paper concludes with a discussion of a rethinking of civilising and decivilising processes, intended and unintended developments, short-term and long-term processes, and the role of knowledge in civilising processes.

Key words: alcohol, climate change, drugs, Michel Foucault, Norbert Elias, moral panic

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Introduction

This article uses the examples of alcohol use, drugging and climate change to comparatively explore the civilising and decivilising processes involved in the moral panics about these three issues. The aim of such a comparative discussion is twofold. First, to identify the complex countervailing trends that occur before, during and after a given moral panic, highlighting the complexity of moral panics and dismissing the notion that they are mere 'bad' aberrations. This will aid in the theoretical-conceptual-empirical development of moral panic. Second, to use these three moral panic case studies to raise some questions about how we conceptualise civilising and decivilising processes and civilising offensives. Through combining the comparative analysis with a discussion of Elias, Foucault and moral panic, we can identify several areas where we can further the development of the work of Norbert Elias and figurational sociology. These areas are: the relation between civilising and decivilising processes; the relation between intended and unintended developments; the relation between short- and long-term processes; and the role of knowledge in civilising processes.

1.1. What is a moral panic?

The following extract is the opening paragraph from Stan Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, and is the most oft quoted statement on moral panic:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen, 1972:1)

Reading through Cohen's groundbreaking study, as well as other moral panic studies, definitions of moral panic in dictionaries and textbooks, along with the popular usage of the concept, it is clear that moral panic is more often regarded as an overreaction to a perceived social problem. However, in this essay I will be

using a revised definition of moral panic that does not presuppose an overreaction (Rohloff, 2011a).

My usage of moral panic is a changing one, being developed and refined in relation to theory and research: by exploring moral panic in relation to quite different empirical examples, such as the long term development of climate change as a social problem; and by utilizing the work of Norbert Elias to explore the relation between moral panics and civilising and decivilising processes.

2. Moral panics as decivilising processes?

As many authors, such as Mennell (1990) and Fletcher (1997), have explored, decivilising processes may occur where there is a weakening of the state, for example, in the aftermath of social or natural crises. But for moral panics to occur, there need not necessarily be an *actual* weakening, only a *perceived* weakening. People may believe, incorrectly or not, that governmental regulations, and the enforcement of those regulations, are failing to control a particular perceived problem. Conversely, they may be under the impression that individuals are failing to regulate their own behaviour and therefore there is a need for a stronger external force; this could either come from 'official' authorities, such as those of 'the state', or from non-state groups, such as social movement or reform groups, vigilante groups, 'terrorist' groups, etc.

Another characteristic of decivilising processes is an increase in the level of danger and its incalculability; where the threat of danger becomes increasingly more difficult to predict. With some moral panics, the distortion of the reality of the social problem, via the 'exaggeration and distortion' of reporting on phenomena (reporting of both past events and potential future risks), may contribute to the perception that these dangers are both increasing and are difficult to predict.

However, rather than conceptualizing moral panics as *complete* decivilising process, we can instead see how the perceived failure of the state and/or its citizens, along with a perceived increase in danger and possibly a decrease in identification with those who are believed to be the 'dangerous', may be enough to bring about *partial* decivilising processes in the form of a moral panic. When a perceived danger or threat becomes highlighted and mass communicated, fears may increase and danger may come to be perceived as increasingly incalculable with regard to that specific issue (and possibly beyond). Those who are believed to be 'the problem' – the 'folk devils' – may come to be seen as the 'dangerous', 'uncivilised' 'other' that 'we' need protecting from. During this process, folk devils may come to be increasingly dehumanized. In an attempt to quickly address the perceived problem 'before it is too late', there may not be enough time for in depth research or consultation with those who have researched the issue – or, the utilization of research may be overridden by commonsense solutions. Therefore, these solutions proposed may not necessarily be well informed, and may not function adequately to address the given issue; indeed, they may have the unintended consequence of

contributing to the problem. It is during such times that the knowledge about the issue may be characterized by a decrease in reality congruence and an increase in fantasy content. In attempts to address the issue, the state and/or its citizens may use increasingly more violent, ‘uncivilised’ measures (in the name of ‘civilisation’). Examples of such measures may include the development of new laws that override certain civil liberties, increasing hate crimes and other forms of discrimination, and the development of vigilantism (Rohloff, 2008, 2011b).

Let us now turn to the example of drug use to illustrate how moral panics can be conceived of as partial decivilising processes.

2.1. ‘The Drugtakers’

In *The Drugtakers* (Young, 1971), undertaken in the late 1960s with a group of marijuana smokers living in Notting Hill, Jock Young observed a process occurring whereby the population in England was continually changing, and while there was increasing heterogeneity, this *appeared* to be happening at too fast a pace for some people to be able to adjust to. There was no longer the homogenous population to dictate patterns of behaviour; there was ongoing resistance to established ways of behaving, which resulted in the development of subcultures such as bohemianism. There existed the perception that informal social controls (and self controls) were failing to regulate the behaviour of particular groups (such as the ‘drugtakers’), so social control was left largely in the hands of formal agencies, such as the Police.

Young focuses particularly on the police, for their isolated position, and how this plays a role in deviancy amplification. He argues that ‘drug taking’ begins as a minor actual problem. Via the media’s effect, the problem is amplified, and so comes to be perceived as being greater than what it actually is. This perception contributes to police action which makes the real problem greater, such as increased marginalization of the drugtaker from the rest of society, and the progression onto other drugs and other crimes (as unintended outcomes). If we follow Young’s argument, the intentional interventions by the police are contributing to the kinds of things they are trying to prevent: the escalation of occasional marijuana use, heroin use, other crimes, etc.

The drugtaker is seen as a threat to the moral standards of both the policeman and the regular criminal: drugtakers are seen as something different altogether, as Young quotes one policeman:

“I tell you, there’s something about users that bugs me. I don’t know what exactly. You want me to be frank? OK. Well, I can’t stand them; I mean I *really* can’t stand them. Why? Because they bother me personally. They’re *dirty*, that’s what they are, filthy. They make my skin crawl.

It’s funny but I don’t get that reaction to ordinary criminals. You pinch a burglar or a pickpocket and you understand each other; you know how it is, you stand around yacking, maybe even crack a few jokes. But Jesus, these guys, they’re a danger. You know what I mean, they’re like Commies or some of those CORE people.

There are some people you can feel sorry for. You know, you go out and pick up some poor chump of a paper hanger [bad-cheque writer] and he's just a drunk and life's got him all bugged. You can understand a poor guy like that. It's different with anybody who'd used drugs" (policeman, quoted in Young, 1971:173).

Here, we can see a process of dehumanization – where 'they' (the drugtakers) come to be seen increasingly less like the rest of 'us'.

Young noted how the drugtaker was a visible target to Police, with his long hair, unusual style of dress, all of which made him exceedingly visible (Young, 1971:174). This visibility, along with the power ratios between the police and the media on the one hand, and the drugtakers on the other, meant that the drugtaker was comparatively easy to typify as a folk devil (as compared to the example of climate change).

The media are often our main source of information about events, and about people that we have no direct involvement with. But, as Young argues, news has to be 'newsworthy', so the mass media, "selects events which are *atypical*, presents them in a *stereotypical* fashion, and contrasts them against a backcloth of normality which is *overtypical*." (Young, 1971:179) This further contributes to the notion of a 'deviant them' and a 'good us'; contrasting the 'bad' with the 'good', the 'wrong' with the 'right'. Perhaps this is similar in some ways to manners books, but in a different format; such media coverage further contributes to the establishment of what is considered acceptable behaviour. How stories are played out in the news function, perhaps, as 'moral' narratives in the same way as the much more explicit prescriptive manners books of the past. We can also see similarities with Elias & Scotson's *The Established and the Outsiders* (2008), regarding how 'praise gossip' and 'blame gossip' may further contribute to amplify divisions between groups, to further contribute to misperceptions about the reality of what all of these people are really like. Instead of showing a complex picture of a variety of people who do and do not smoke marijuana, for example, we are instead presented with polar opposites that are stereotyped and presented as representative of all.

While characteristics of the above example of the drugtakers may apply to *some* cases that have been classified as moral panics (such as the development of counter-terrorism tactics and the public reaction to those post-9/11²), I wish to argue that it is not simply the case that all moral panics are merely decivilising processes, and not all moral panics necessarily fit this 'classic' model. Indeed, as Elias himself would no doubt have argued, civilising and decivilising processes (and, thereby,

²Moral panic research (Altheide, 2009; Kappeler & Kappeler, 2004; Rothe & Muzzatti, 2004; Welch, 2004) and figurational research (M. Dunning, 2010; Vertigans, 2010) can be combined here to explore the civilising and decivilising processes involved in the development of both moral panics about terrorism (reactions to and representations of terrorism) and the process of terrorism itself.

moral panics), are much more complex than this. Potentially, civilising processes may contribute to the emergence of moral panics, and moral panics may, in turn, feed back into civilising processes. Let us now compare the cases of drugtaking, climate change and alcohol use to explore how civilising processes may contribute to the development of moral panics and partial decivilising processes.

3. How civilising processes contribute to moral panics

3.1. 'The drugtakers'

3.1.1. Heterogeneity, informalization and reformation

As we saw in the above account, one characteristic of civilising processes, increasing heterogeneity, in part could be said to have contributed to the development of the moral panic about drugtakers. Perhaps the degree of heterogeneity increased at such a rapid rate that people's personality make-ups did not have time to adjust to these changes. Their response, therefore, took the form of a moral panic, containing decivilising symptoms, and with attempts to 'reformatize' the process of 'informalization' (on informalization and reformation, see Wouters, 2007).

3.1.2. Division of labour, functional democratization and knowledge

Increasing division of labour and functional democratisation, also symptoms of civilising processes, similarly contributed to the moral panic about drugtaking and the decivilising trends that accompanied it. As we saw above, the police, along with members of the public, had little direct access to the issues and the people involved (i.e. drugtakers and drugtaking). This meant that they were reliant on highly mediated sources of information – media portrayals, rumour, and so on. This mediated knowledge facilitated the distortion of the reality of the social problem, contributing to increasing the fantasy content and decreasing the reality congruence of knowledge about drugtakers.

3.2. Climate change moral panics

We can see how other aspects of civilising processes relate to the development of what might be called moral panics over climate change. These might consist of two different types of panics. First, reactions of concern about 'runaway climate change', urging governments, corporations and individuals to develop more 'green', 'ethical', moderate ways of living and thus reduce carbon emissions (Cohen, 2011; Rohloff,

2011a). Second, reactions of climate change ‘sceptics’ to such campaigns, some of which claim that climate change campaigners and scientists are conspiring to distort and exaggerate the evidence for climate change (Ungar, 2011). We could then add a third possible moral panic: the reaction of campaigners to sceptics, where sceptics themselves become folk devils in the form of climate change ‘deniers’ (Cohen, 2011).

3.2.1. The monopolization and de-monopolization of knowledge

Within these three possible climate change moral panics, civilising processes may be giving rise to decivilising trends in several ways, particularly in the area of knowledge. The long-term civilising trend of the monopolization of scientific knowledge through increasing specialization within scientific establishments (where knowledge becomes less and less accessible to those outside the specialism) has contributed to what Ungar (Ungar, 2000) terms a ‘knowledge-ignorance paradox’. While everyone potentially has access to this knowledge, to be able to readily have full access to it they have to learn the language of that specialism and how to interpret its knowledge. Due to the time it would take to ‘learn the language’ of each specialism, and due to the sheer number that exist, there is a relative illiteracy between areas of knowledge. And so people come increasingly to rely upon mediated, popular, simplified versions of knowledge, as we saw in the example of the drugtakers. For climate change, the numbers of different disciplines that are contributing to the science of climate change further complicate this, as it is difficult for even one specialist to grasp all the expertises required to understand all the different methods that contribute to what we know (and what we do not know) about climate change. And so the monopolization of knowledge by scientific establishments coincides with a de-monopolization of knowledge via the public sphere – popular, mediated versions of scientific knowledge that scientific establishments may have little control over (Rohloff, 2011a). In this way, the civilising trend of increased division of labour in science has contributed to the development of mediated knowledge, facilitating the campaigns by climate change advocates and climate change sceptics, and allowing for increasing uncertainty about the relative dangers of climate change.

3.3. Moral panics about alcohol

3.3.1. Increasing incalculability of danger

In a different way, civilising processes may be contributing to moral panics about alcohol use and ‘binge drinking’. Critcher and Yeomans have explored moral panics about alcohol from the 18th century through to the 21st century. Yeomans argues the reaction to the Licensing Act 2003 (and the alleged impact it would have

on ‘binge drinking’) “appears irrational and disproportionate to the level of threat actually posed” (Yeomans, 2009, para. 2.6). Presumably, Yeomans would suggest this could apply to all moral panics about alcohol that have occurred since the first ‘gin panic’ in the 18th century. Such comments suggest an increasing incalculability of the dangers posed by alcohol, or at least a widespread increase in the fantasy content of the knowledge about alcohol use.

3.3.2. Shifting power relations between the sexes during the ‘gin craze’

Critcher (2011), on the other hand, identifies several processes that contributed to the ‘gin craze’. He notes how, from the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries, England had a surplus of grain, which was in turn used to make alcohol. At the same time, the government passed laws to encourage the production of spirits in England (and prohibited imports). This contributed to a great increase in the production and consumption of gin. Many of those involved (in both drinking and selling gin) were female. It thus contributed to shifting power relations between males and females, however by providing employment for women, it was seen at the time to be wrongfully taking them away from their domestic duties. Gin soon came to be seen as the source of all things evil, and was targeted as a problem drink (while people were encouraged to instead drink alternatives such as beer). Subsequently, the government passed eight acts of parliament, including ones to increase taxes and licensing fees. Later, poor harvests resulted in a ban on using grain for distilling alcohol (Critcher, 2011).

We can see, then how rapid changes in the power relations between men and women, changes towards more equal relations, were responded to with increasing social controls and an increase in the fantasy content (and decrease in the reality congruent) of knowledge about gin drinking. It could also be the case that the sudden wide availability of gin happened at such a fast rate that people did not have time to gradually adjust and develop self-restraint towards the consumption of gin.

3.3.3. Industrialization, civilisation, and changing standards of behaviour

In contrast to these moral panic approaches, Gerritsen (Gerritsen, 2000), in his study of the regulation of alcohol (and opiates), uses Elias to highlight some of the long-term processes that have contributed to the development of different ways alcohol is regulated, consumed and perceived. We might extend Gerritsen’s work to explore how these long-term processes he identifies feed into various moral panics about alcohol. During the nineteenth century, as the temperance movement was developing, Gerritsen notes how at the same time industrialization was changing workers’ jobs. Many people, who had previously worked on the land, were increasingly required to work in factories where they had to adjust to a new way of working: “they had to learn more controlled and more predictable patterns of behaviour; the mechanized and factory-based production methods made this

indispensable” (Gerritsen, 2000). This regulation of people’s personalities at work transferred to their lives outside work as well, and so they came to be more disciplined in all areas of their lives. This is just one example of how one aspect of civilising processes contributed to changing standards of behaviour, thereby contributing to concerns about the amount of alcohol people were consuming and how alcohol affected their behaviour. And so we can see how civilising processes can contribute to moral panics – and possible decivilising trends – about alcohol.

4. How moral panics contribute to civilising processes

4.1. Alcohol and the long-term shift toward increasing self-restraint

In contrast to seeing moral panics about alcohol as decivilising trends, we could also conceptualize them as civilising offensives and civilising spurts that may further the development of civilising processes. In the above example of civilising processes – industrialization and the changes in behaviour accompanying it – contributing to moral panic about alcohol use, we can argue that particular moral panic (i.e. the temperance movement) may have contributed, in the long-term, to increasing self-restraint.

4.2. Climate change, ecological civilising processes and increasing moderation

Similarly, moral panics about climate change, at least those ones that are seeking to highlight the dangers of climate change and being about change before it is too late, can be regarded as civilising offensives. Many aspects of climate change campaigns share similarities with campaigns about alcohol, tobacco and obesity. All of these forms of consumption – eating, drinking and smoking – have experienced long-term changes towards increasing moderation (Hughes, 2003; Mennell, 1987). Likewise, there now exist many guides on ‘living green’ or stopping climate change, that urge consumers to decrease their overall consumption, stop ‘bingeing’ and overcome their addictions to consuming, shopping and fossil fuels. Could climate change moral panics be civilising spurts, attempts to accelerate the development of ‘ecological civilising processes’?³

³ On ‘ecological civilising processes’, see Quilley (2004, 2009).

4.3. The drugtaking moral panic as a civilising offensive

For the example of the drugtakers, it is less clear how that particular moral panic may have contributed to civilising processes in the long-term. Nevertheless, in the short-term, it might possibly have been similar to a civilising offensive. The moral indignation directed at the drugtakers is rationalized in the rhetoric of humanitarianism; where the rhetoric of ‘saving’ or ‘bettering’ these people is used to mask the “moral or material conflicts behind the mantle of humanitarianism” (Young, 1971:99). This is perhaps similar to van Krieken’s (van Krieken, 1999) argument that civilising offensives may be carried out in the name of civilisation, but may contain within them decivilising symptoms. And so, perhaps, some moral panics could be regarded as certain manifestations of civilising offensives.

5. Good and bad moral panics

What does this mean for the tendency to normatively judge moral panics as being ‘bad’ events? The following two extracts are taken from Stan Cohen’s Introduction to the 3rd edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, in a section titled ‘Good and Bad Moral Panics?’:

It is obviously true that the uses of the [moral panic] concept to expose disproportionality and exaggeration have come from within a left liberal consensus. The empirical project is concentrated on (if not reserved for) cases where the moral outrage appears driven by conservative or reactionary forces...the point [of moral panic research] was to expose social reaction not just as over-reaction in some quantitative sense, but first, as *tendentious* (that is, slanted in a particular ideological direction) and second, as *misplaced* or *displaced* (that is, aimed – whether deliberately or thoughtlessly – at a target which was not the ‘real’ problem) (Cohen, 2002:xxxix).

Perhaps we could purposely *recreate* the conditions that made the Mods and Rockers panic so successful (exaggeration, sensitization, symbolization, prediction, etc.) and thereby overcome the barriers of denial, passivity and indifference that prevent a full acknowledgement of human cruelty and suffering (Cohen, 2002:xxxix).

The first extract clearly illustrates the assumption – the presupposition – that moral panics are seen as ‘bad’. However, while they are deemed to be ‘bad’ in the eyes of the researcher, no doubt in some instances those involved in the panic thought that they were doing ‘good’. This illustrates the necessity for moral panic researchers to look beyond the ‘conservative’ examples that are typical of the classic moral panics; no doubt the climate at the time, 1960s/1970s, contributed to a particular research focus that has left a legacy where the ‘political project’ (see Critcher, 2009) of moral panic research remains a prime focus, thereby limiting the application, exploration and development of the concept (see also Garland, 2008; Rohloff & Wright, 2010).

In stark contrast to this, in the second extract above, Cohen suggests the possibility of purposefully engineering moral panics, to overcome the denial of atrocities (linking in with his work on the flipside of panic: denial; see Cohen, 2001). However, I wish to suggest that even Cohen's hypothetical 'good' panics could have unintended, disintegrative, decivilising outcomes; given certain conditions, rather than merely bringing attention to atrocities and overcoming denial, the 'good' panic may contribute to further cruelty and suffering. Furthermore, if the 'good' panic is still not well informed, it may lead to further denial; communicating emotion and fear, rather than enabling, may be disabling (for example, in relation to climate change, see O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009).

One of the important contributions of Cohen's suggestion of 'good' and 'bad' moral panics is as a heuristic device. As we have seen, moral panic has largely been conceptualised in negative terms, as a 'bad' episode that needs remedying and even debunking. The introduction of the term 'good moral panic' may help to shift the focus of moral panic studies towards those examples that in the past have largely been neglected (climate change, tobacco smoking, obesity, and so on) as campaigns surrounding those issues are increasingly supported by moral panic researchers (see Cohen, 2011, for a discussion on the changing relationship between researchers and the campaigns they are investigating), and where the notion of debunking would not necessarily apply.

While the notion of 'good' moral panic is useful as a heuristic device, we need to be wary of the dichotomy of bad and good moral panics, or moral panics as *either* decivilising processes *or* civilising spurts. As we have seen above, moral panics are much more complex than this.

6. Moral panics as civilising and decivilising processes

As I have argued elsewhere (Rohloff, 2011b; Rohloff & Wright, 2010), one way to overcome this dichotomy is to utilise a figurational approach to moral panic studies. This would involve efforts to reduce the intrusion of 'heteronomous valuations' (Elias, 1978) into moral panic research, and removing the normative presupposition that a particular reaction to a given issue is an inappropriate reaction in need of debunking. Such a method would require a detour via detachment and a subsequent secondary involvement (Elias, 2007) to allow for the possibility of intervention after the research has been completed (for example, to suggest more adequate responses to perceived problems). Combining this with a figurational approach that focuses on long-term developments, exploring gradual processes that influence the development of panics, can also help to overcome the inherent bias within moral panic studies (this is already happening, to a certain extent, with some researchers incorporating moral regulation approaches (for example, see Hier, 2008; Hunt, 2011)).

As well as employing these methods, we can combine all that we have learned from the above comparative discussion to focus on exploring both civilising and

decivilising trends, to conceptualise moral panics as civilising and decivilising processes. Such an approach can take account of the interplay of complex civilising and decivilising processes that are developing before, during and after moral panics, thereby avoiding the dichotomy of 'good' or 'bad' moral panics.

We can take climate change and broader environmental and animal rights campaigns as an example. As outlined above, moral panic research has explored the role of information and knowledge in climate change – both in campaigns by those who are demanding action to mitigate climate change, and in campaigns by climate change sceptics. Ungar in particular explores what he terms 'strong' and 'weak' disproportionality; the former referring to claims by sceptics that scientists are distorting and exaggerating, the latter referring to climate campaigners focusing on claims that represent the direst threats (Ungar, 2011). In relation to the argument that climate change campaigns represent civilising offensives to further civilising processes (Rohloff, 2011a), there has been some figurational research that has argued that the development of ecological sensibilities could be seen as a type of civilising process (Quilley, 2009; Schmidt, 1993). The development of the phenomenon of climate change may, in part, have been contributed to by certain outcomes of processes of civilisation, where decivilising consequences have resulted in the form of *excess* capitalism and *overconsumption*, to the relative detriment of the environment and social life as a whole (see Ampudia de Haro, 2008). Moral panics about climate change (excluding those involving sceptics) might be used as a civilising offensive to bring about a civilising 'spurt'.

While we might be tempted to classify such a moral panic as a civilising process, we must consider possible decivilising trends. One has already been mentioned: the strong and weak disproportionality, contributing to increasingly incalculability of danger. Another decivilising disintegrative processes could occur via the development of 'good' and 'bad' behaviours into 'good' and 'bad' people. This is already occurring, through the emergence of such terms as 'eco-friendly', 'eco-criminal', 'eco-deviant'. Potentially, if standards of behaviour increased to such an extent and those who did not behave in an eco-friendly enough manner came to be seen as a great enough threat to the planet and, thereby, every person, then mutual identification between the 'eco-friendly' and the 'eco-deviant' may decrease, contributing to changes in the way these groups interact. Such a process is already happening, to a limited extent, with a minority of animal rights and environmental activists who prioritize animal/environmental rights over the rights of people they see to be threatening certain animals and environments. Here, increasing mutual identification with animals and the environment is accompanied with a decreasing mutual identification with some other people (for example, see Quilley, 2009:133). And so we see civilising processes occurring alongside decivilising processes. Consequently, moral panics over climate change could be regarded as both, potentially, civilising and decivilising processes.

7. Elias and Foucault: On de/civilising processes and moral panics

Having outlined how moral panics can be explored through both civilising and decivilising processes, we now turn to bringing an additional approach into the discussion – Foucault – to further a rethink of civilising and decivilising process, intended and unintended developments, short- and long-term processes, and the role of knowledge in processes of civilisation.

7.1. Civilising and decivilising processes

Before we turn to Foucault, let us first recap on what comparing Elias and moral panic can suggest about civilising and decivilising processes. To date, decivilising processes have been conceptualised as civilising processes in reverse (Mennell, 1990), occurring where there is an increase in actual danger and a decrease in the calculability of danger. Conversely, as we have seen above, some moral panics occur where there is only a perceived, and not necessarily an actual, increase in danger. This suggests that we may need to expand how we conceptualise decivilising processes, taking into consideration both realities and perceptions, and the interplay between the two. An additional issue arises when we ask the question: is this particular episode civilising or decivilising? Is this even an important question? Does it increase the likelihood of falling into a dichotomous trap? Should we instead be exploring both the civilising and decivilising trends that are occurring in any given period of time that we are studying, without concerning ourselves with which ones are dominant? If we do want to, how do we quantifiably assess the dominance of civilising processes over decivilising processes, or vice versa?

7.2. Intended and unintended developments

An additional question we can draw out of the comparison between moral panics and de/civilising processes is of the relationship between intended and unintended developments. As argued elsewhere (Rohloff & Wright, 2010), some researchers have conceptualised moral panics as intentional developments (while others have characterised them as unintentional). It is well recognised that, while Elias acknowledged that people “act intentionally, their intentions always arising from and directed towards the developments not planned by them” (Elias, 2008 [1980]:32), he is regarded as focusing on unplanned developments (even though his ‘process model’ “encompasses at its nucleus a dialectical movement between intentional and unintentional social changes” (Elias, 2008 [1980]:32). Foucault, on the other hand, is seen to focus on planned action (Binkley, Dolan, Ernst, & Wouters, 2010, pp. 75-76). Combining approaches from Foucault and Elias, as exemplified in moral panic research, may help to overcome the division between intended and unintended developments. If we utilise the concept of civilising

offensive, we can devote more space to exploring the relatively neglected area of the relation between processes and offensives, between the unplanned and the planned. As Dunning & Sheard (E. Dunning & Sheard, 2005:280) and van Krieken (van Krieken, 1990:366) argue, this is an area of relative neglect in figurational research.

7.3. Short- and long-term processes

Inextricably tied into planned action and unplanned developments, is the relation between short- and long-term processes. Moral panic research has tended to focus on the short-term, implying (perhaps in a Foucauldian way) the occurrence of an epistemic rupture. All of a sudden, a problem is identified and we have a moral panic. This focus on sudden, abrupt change is similar to Foucault's focus on ruptures, discontinuities, breaks, and so on (see Binkley, et al., 2010; Foucault, 2002). This contrasts with Elias's attention to the long-term. Similar to the above, if we combine the work of Foucault and Elias, in the case of moral panic (and other examples), we can explore the interrelation between short-term and long-term processes, thereby developing a more encompassing method for sociological research.

7.4. The role of knowledge in civilising processes

As already outlined in the case studies discussed above, the role of knowledge in civilising and decivilising processes should be of central focus. Research on decivilising (and dycivilising) processes in particular tends to focus on the role of violence – on its monopolisation and de-monopolisation by a central state authority (for example, see de Swaan, 2001; Fletcher, 1997; Mennell, 1990). However, as the cases discussed above suggest, as does the development of moral panics more generally, the monopolisation and de-monopolisation of knowledge can also play a prominent role in the development of decivilising processes.

Increased reliance upon expert knowledge – the expertization and monopolization of knowledge – leads to increased interdependencies, characteristic of civilising processes, but this can also contribute to decivilising. For example, with a moral panic, where claims may be exaggerated, distorted, or even invented, danger may come to be perceived as greater than it actually is⁴. Thus, as with the monopolisation of violence, the monopolisation of knowledge may also entail the

⁴ Although this is not necessarily always the case, as can be seen with the example of climate change (Rohloff, 2011a).

potential for ‘dyscivilising processes’ (de Swaan, 2001), as may be the case with ‘elite engineered’ (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009) moral panics.

Conversely, the growth in alternative media and the advent of the Internet have increasingly enabled the possibility for alternative claims and counter-claims, thereby reducing the monopolisation of knowledge. The decreased in monopolisation may then lead to danger becoming increasingly incalculable (who’s knowledge, or claims, do we believe?). This rise in the incalculability of danger may then contribute to rising fears and anxieties, which may then be expressed as moral panics. And so, the de-monopolisation of knowledge, as with violence, may contribute to decivilising processes. However, the de-monopolisation of knowledge may also assist in the prevention of moral panics and, when they do occur, foreshorten the process of moral panics; for, in ‘multi-mediated social worlds’, dissenting voices may be readily voiced and heard (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995).

8. Conclusion

This paper has compared three moral panic case studies – drugtaking, alcohol use, and climate change – to comparatively discuss and flesh out the civilising and decivilising processes that occur before, during and after moral panics. The discussion has furthered the development of moral panic research by highlighting that panics are much more complex processes than what many researchers tend to recognise. In doing so, I have attempted to address the issues with moral panics being conceptualised dichotomously as either bad or good moral panics (while acknowledging the usefulness of this as a heuristic).

For figurational research, the above discussion has contributed to efforts to further develop theorising and research on the relation between civilising and decivilising processes, questioning how we conceptualise and quantify these processes. In drawing attention to the relatively neglected role of knowledge, I have highlighted an additional area of research to pursue, one that may contribute to how we conceptualise the development of processes of civilisation.

The comparison between Elias, Foucault and moral panic highlights the value of figurational researchers engaging with non-Eliasian concepts and theories. Through combining these three areas of research, we can begin to explore the relatively neglected areas of the relation between short- and long-term processes, and intended and unintended developments. And possibly much more.

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